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The Effects of Processing Instruction and Traditional Instruction on the Acquisition of the Present Perfect Tense in the Italian Language

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a parallel classroom experiment investigating the effects of processing instruction and traditional instruction on the acquisition of the Present Perfect Tense in the Italian language. The subjects involved in the present studies were Macedonian student-age learners of Italian residing in their own country. The participants were divided into two groups. The first group received processing instruction and the second group was exposed to traditional instruction. One interpretation and one production measures were used in a post-test design (immediate effect only). The results showed that processing instruction had positive effects on the processing and acquisition of the target feature. The processing instruction group performed better than the traditional instruction group in the interpretation task and in the production task.

Keywords: processing instruction; foreign language; grammar; grammar teaching.

1. Introduction

The idea to start research on this topic has emerged as a result of the aspiration to obtain relevant results that will clarify the dilemma regarding the teaching of grammar during foreign language lessons that will offer a solution in terms of certain disagreements related with today's grammar teaching matters on L2.

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The latest research in foreign language teaching methodology suggests that explicit explanations are not indispensable for successful mastering a foreign language, and therefore teaching materials are made in accordance with the communicative approach in teaching foreign language, that is, the language is learned only throughout its use. Although scientists insist on "learning through conversation" and this teaching is present in many textbooks for a foreign language, however, teachers more often practice the explicit explanation of grammatical rules.

The debate over the question whether or not it is necessary to teach grammar in foreign language acquisition, that is whether the explicit explanation is necessary or not, Van Patten redirects it from the question: "Is it necessary or not?" towards the question: "How should do we it? "[1] and offers, according to him, the most appropriate solution. He suggests teaching grammar with *Processing Instruction* within the framework of communicative curricula.

Processing instruction (hereinafter referred to as the abbreviation PI) is a new pedagogical approach based on Krashen's Input Hipothesis. According to VanPatten, this is a grammar based instruction based on input, which is in accordance with the theories of the acquisition of L2 and the communicative instruction in L2, aiming to influence students' attention to the data in the input. VanPatten believes that exposing to the input itself is not enough for a successful acquisition of L2, and it is therefore necessary to teach students how to process the input in order to adopt grammar more seucessfully. PI aims to encourage students to identify the grammatical form in the input [2: 764].

The aims of the traditional grammar instruction is to produce sentences with a target grammatical form, while the PI's aim is to change the way students pay attention to the input and process it, considering that the acquisition of L2 is a process that depends on the input and occurs when students are exposed to meaningful input [3].

The subject of this research is to determine the difference between the Processing Instruction and the explicit grammar instruction during the classes of Italian as a foreign language, experimentally.

The first research on the effects of PI in the acquisition of L2 is done by VanPatten & Cadierno [4]. They compare PI with the traditional teaching that is directed to the output and which includes grammatical explanations followed by an output exercises.

A significant number of studies has been carried out [5, 6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20] in order to determine the effectiveness of PI in relation to other types of teaching, but certain part of these studies do not provide solid evidence of the benefits of PI.

The main purpose of this research is to determine if Processing Instruction leads to better success in understanding and production of target grammatical structures compared to the explicit explanation of grammatical rules. So, this research strives to confirm the functionality of PI while acquiring the grammatical structures in the Italian as a foreign language.

Before the start of the research, we set forth the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: We assume that students who follow PI while acquiring the grammatical structure *Italian Present Perfect Tense* will achieve better success on the test for understanding than the students apointed to follow explicit grammar instructions during the lessons of Italian;

Hypothesis 2: We assume that students who follow PI in the acquisition of the grammar structure *Italian Present Perfect Tense* will achieve better success on the test of production than the students apointed to follow explicit grammar instructions during the lessons of Italian;

2. Materials and methods

This research was conducted at the Faculty of Philology at "Goce Delchev" University in Shtip. The purpose of this experimental research is to determine the effects of Processing Instruction on the acquisition of Italian Present Perfect Tense.

Participants in the research are students who study Italian in the first semester.

The experimental group is consisted of 15 students who study Italian as the first language, while the control group is consisted of 23 students who study Italian language as an elective. In this regard it has to be noted that the research, or the teaching of the target grammatical structure, *Italian Present Perfect Tense* (Passato prossimo) was in accordance with the curriculum envisaged for the course of Italian Language 1 (as elective) and the course of Italian Language 1 (as a compulsory) both taught in the first semester. In accordance with the curriculum, students should learn how to form *Past Participle* (participio passato), how to construct *Passato prossimo*, which verbs change with the auxiliary verb *essere* (to be), which verbs change with the auxiliary verb *avere* (to have) and master the irregular forms of the participle of the past. It is also important to note that students were not previously informed about the target structure, nor that they would participate in some kind of research and had normally follow the envisaged teaching activities.

The research was conducted in two stages.

First, there was an approach towards the implicit teaching of the target structure. The experimental group (hereinafter abbreviated as EG) was consisted of 15 students who studied Italian as the first language during the winter semester in 2012, attended the implicit teaching of the target structure with the implementation of structured input activities (hereinafter referred to as the abbreviation SIA) over six instructional hours. We created the structured inputs that we used in this research in accordance with the instructions for creating the SIA and following the example of SIA applied in the research of VanPatten. Herein attention was kept so the input should be equal with the input that the students in the control group will be exposed to.

This research is based on Principle 1 (b) "**The Lexical Preference Principle**. Learners will tend to rely on lexical items as opposed to grammatical form to get meaning when both encode the same semantic information" [21: 9].

For the reason that students will rely on adverbs of time in order to determine the verbal time in the sentence, we removed all adverbs during the SIA, so students had to pay attention to the verb form to determine the time in the sentence.

In this research we did not give any explicit information about the target structure or explicit information about the "wrong" strategy, such as about the problem of processing, but the students focused their attention only on the work with SIA. The classes started immediately with the SIA. The input was structured in such manner that the grammatical form had the meaning and the student was to be careful about it in order to complete the exercise. During the lessons, students did not produce the form. In this group that works only with SIA, students received the same kind and quantity of input as the students in the control group.

In the referential activities, we asked students to determine whether it was an action or an event that happened in the past or is happening now. After the completion of the reference activity, the students were given a feedback in order to know what the correct answer was, but we did not give them explicit information nor additional grammatical explanation, having in mind the conclusion of VanPatten and Oikennon that when SIA is properly created there is no need for explicit information and that explicit information is not a compulsory component of PI. Namely, after completing each activity we took students' responses and told them whether they were correct or incorrect. In case of an correct answer we did not give an explanation, we only said that the answer was correct, but we did not say why it was correct, while for the incorrect answer we said that the choice they made was not correct and that the other option was correct, but we did not give explicit information like feedback.

During the emotional activities, we asked students to express their opinion or belief regarding the sentences they read or listened, and the students responded to the content of the claims, whether they agreed or disagreed, whether this claim relates to them or not, whether the act or event is appropriate in a particular group or not, whether they have done something similar or different, and so on.

At each lesson we worked on five activities (three referential and two emotional), i.e. we created a total of 30 SIA (18 referential and 12 emotional).

The second stage of the research was conducted during the winter semester in the academic year 2014. The control group (hereinafter referred to as the abbreviation CG) was consisted of 23 students who study Italian as an elective course in the first semester. They followed a direct deductive proactive explicit teaching during six instructional hours of 45 minutes. No specific activities were created for this part of the research, but the textbook and workbook "Progetto italiano nuovo 2, Corso multimediale di lingua e civiltà italiana", Livello elementare A1-A2, Quadro europeo di riferimento" by the authors T. Marin & S. Magneli, publisher: Edilingua, that is, the activities envisaged in Lesson 4 (No. unità 4), pg. 57 to pg. 63. It is important to mention that we changed the order of the anticipated activities in the textbook, we were careful not to be exposed to the same input as the students in the experimental group, therefore we removed some activities, i.e. students followed direct deductive proactive explicit teaching.

3. Results

After the completion of the six scheduled instructional hours we performed the testing. We created two tests - one to check the *understanding skill* and one to check the *production skill* of the target form.

In the test for *understanding* (skill) by reading and listening, students were firstly tasked to read a text and then without consulting to determine which of the 10 sentences offered were true or false. Than they listened a dialogue and got a second task to determine which of the 10 sentences offered were true or false in accordance with the dialogue they listened. Each correct answer was evaluated with 1 point, i.e. students could score a maximum of 20 points. The students were timed with 15 minutes for the first task and 10 minutes for the second task.

In the test for *production skill* or writing of target form, the students were engaged to solve three exercises. In the first, they had to determine which auxiliary verb is appropriate for the given participle of the past tense, in the second exercise they were required to write the appropriate form of the verb in the past tense (auxiliary verb and participle of the past tense) and, finally, they were supposed to write a short story in the past for three people, in accordance with the offered pictures and expressions. Each correct answer in the first and second exercise was evaluated with 1 point, i.e. students could score a maximum of 20 points, while the third exercise carried a maximum of 8 points. Students had 30 minutes to work on this test.

Table 1: Success achieved on the test for understanding

Exercise no. 1				Exercise no. 2			
Number of students in EG	Points scored	Number of students in CG	Points scored	Number of students in EG	Points scored	Number of students in CG	Points scored
2	10	3	10	2	10	1	10
3	9	3	9	2	9	2	9
1	8	2	8	2	8	4	7
5	7	3	7	3	6	3	6
3	6	4	6	2	5	6	5
1	5	4	5	2	4	6	4
Possible max. of scored points 150 (15x10) Scored – 113 or 75,33% of accuracy		4	4	2	3	1	3

	Possible max. of scored points 230 (23x10) Scored – 154 or 66,95% of accuracy	Possible max. of scored points 150 (15x10) Scored – 96 or 64% of accuracy	Possible max. of scored points 230 (23x10) Scored – 131 or 56,95% of accuracy
Possible max of scored points in all three exercises at EG - 300 Scored points at EG for all three exercises - 209 (113+96) or 69,66 % of accuracy			
Possible max of scored points in all three exercises at CG- 420 Scored points at CG for all three exercises -285 (154+131) or 61,95 % or accuracy			

From this table we can clearly see the achieved success in both groups. Namely, in the first exercise EG attains greater accuracy than CG by 8.38%, while in the second exercise EG is better in the achieved success by 7.05%. Thus, EG achieved 69.66% accuracy in the test for understanding, while the CG achieved 61.95% accuracy or the difference between them was 7.71%.

Table 2: Success achieved on the test for production

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">Exercise no. 1</td><td colspan="2">Exercise no. 2</td><td colspan="2">Exercise no 3</td></tr>
<tr><td>No. of students in EG</td><td>Points scored</td><td>No. of students in CG</td><td>Points scored</td><td>No. of students in EG</td><td>Points scored</td><td>No. of students in CG</td><td>Points scored</td><td>No. of students in EG</td><td>Points scored</td><td>No. of students in CG</td><td>Points scored</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td>10</td><td>6</td><td>10</td><td>5</td><td>10</td><td>4</td><td>10</td><td>2</td><td>8</td><td>4</td><td>8</td></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>9</td><td>4</td><td>9</td><td>3</td><td>9</td><td>2</td><td>9</td><td>2</td><td>7</td><td>2</td><td>7</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>8</td><td>4</td><td>8</td><td>2</td><td>8</td><td>3</td><td>8</td><td>3</td><td>6</td><td>2</td><td>6</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>7</td><td>5</td><td>7</td><td>1</td><td>7</td><td>5</td><td>7</td><td>3</td><td>5</td><td>3</td><td>5</td></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>6</td><td>3</td><td>6</td><td>2</td><td>6</td><td>5</td><td>6</td><td>3</td><td>4</td><td>7</td><td>4</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="3">Possible max. of scored points 150 (15x10) Scored – 131 or 87,33% of accuracy</td><td>1</td><td>5</td><td>1</td><td>5</td><td>2</td><td>4</td><td>2</td><td>3</td><td>5</td><td>3</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">Possible max. of scored points 230 (23x10) Scored – 186 or 80,86% of accuracy</td><td>1</td><td>4</td><td>2</td><td>3</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">Possible max. of scored points 120 (15x8) Scored – 81 or 67,5% of accuracy</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">Possible max. of scored points 184 (23x8) Scored – 116 or 63,04% of accuracy</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Possible max. of scored points 150 (15x10) Scored – 121or 80,66% of accuracy</td><td colspan="2">Possible max. of scored points 230 (23x10) Scored – 161 or 70% of accuracy</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Possible max of scored points in all three exercises at EG- 420
Scored points at EG for all three exercises - 333 (131+121+81) or7 9,28 % or accuracy</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="6">Possible max of scored points in all three exercises at CG- 644
Scored points at CG for all three exercises - 463 (186+161+116) or 71,89 % of accuracy</td></tr>
</table>

Namely, in the first exercise EG attains greater accuracy than CG by 6.47%, in the second exercise EG is better in the achieved success for 10.66%, while in the third exercise the difference between the two groups is 4.46%. Thus, EG achieved 79.28% accuracy in the test for production, while the CG achieved 71.89% accuracy or the difference between them was 7.39%.

We can conclude that the EG achieved a better result, although not with a very significant difference compared to CG. This difference may be due to the fact that it regards students which during the previous education were accustomed to an explicit explanation of the grammatical rules. However, we found that even without explicit information, a solid result in the *understanding through reading and listening skill* and in the *understanding skill through written production* of the target form is achieved.

4. Conclusion

We can conclude that the achieved result is in accordance with the theoretical attitudes of Van Paten's PI approach, which, in turn, is in line with the theories of the acquisition of L2 and the communicative teaching in L2, whose aim is to influence students' attention to the data in input. We have to mention once again that our research differs from the first PI model, which first gives students explicit explanation of the processing strategies and the exact target language strategy, and then they are given SIA whose primary goal is to distract the students of the production of target form. In our research, we removed the explicit information and worked only SIA following the example of VanPatten & Oikkenon research [22]. After summarizing the results, we can conclude that the difference in the achieved success is due to the various activities used in the research, such as when the SIA is properly created, there is no need for explicit information and that the explicit information is not a mandatory component of the PI. In other words, whether students receive explicit explanations or not, it does not affect success. We have found that the conclusion of VanPatten& Oikonon can also refer to other target grammatical forms, meaning our results are in favour of the thesis that explicit information is not indispensable in PI.

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